03/07/24 • NEWS

Antibiotic Use in Pregnancy Linked to Childhood Autoimmune Disease + More

The Defender's Weekly Science Digest delivers a roundup of the latest research on children's health, including studies on vaccines, drugs, chemicals, pesticides and lead exposure.

By Angelo DePalma, Ph.D.

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Early-life air pollution linked to health woes in later life

Higher air pollution exposure in early life is associated with worse health among older adults: A 72-year follow-up study from Scotland; Health & Place, March 2024.

Breathing polluted air raises the risk of illness and death, but research on the very long-term consequences of childhood exposure to fine particulate pollution has been scarce.

A Scottish-led study explained some of the finer points of the pollution-illness-death connection, specifically the effects of estimated exposure to particulate air pollution at age 3 years and poor health outcomes occurring by ages 55, 65, and 75.

Through data from "The Scottish Longitudinal Study 1936 Birth Cohort" — a study of people born that year — investigators linked early-life exposure to particulates with a 10% higher risk of long-term illness in mid-to-late adulthood.

The association was lower or higher depending on the subject's socioeconomic status, with the strongest negative associations among the most disadvantaged.

Investigators believe socioeconomic effects boil down to cognitive ability — the major determining factor in occupation and socioeconomic status, which are independent predictors of long-term illness.

Pandemic-fueled antidepressant use rose, but only for females

Antidepressant Dispensing to US Adolescents and Young Adults: 2016–2022; Pediatrics, Feb. 26, 2024.

The rate of increase in antidepressant prescriptions among youth rose faster during the COVID-19 pandemic than previously but only for females, according to a University of Michigan-led study.

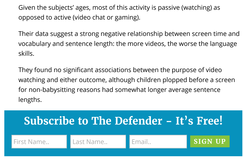
Researchers mined the IQVIA database for prescriptions written between January 2016 and December 2022 to adolescents (12-17 years) and young adults (18-25). IQVIA records more than 90% of antidepressants dispensed at U.S. retail pharmacies.

IQVIA revealed that each month before March 2020, 17 additional people out of every 100,000 in IQVIA's records received an antidepressant prescription. However, beginning in April 2020, an additional 11 of 100,000 people got the drugs, bringing the monthly increase to 28 in 100,000 — an increase of 63.5%.

This sounds like a very large rise but all it represents is a relatively large difference between two very small numbers. For example, a car driving 2 miles per hour is going 100% faster than a car driving 1 mile per hour, but both cars are still driving very slowly.

Males' prescriptions also rose but the increase slowed slightly.

Among the study's possible issues: The adoption of telehealth consultations may have favored prescription writing, males may have sought help less frequently than females in that setting, and it was not known if the antidepressants were prescribed for depression, anxiety or other conditions.



"The Wuhan Cover-Up" by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

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Early food interests predict eating disorders

Early childhood appetitive traits and eating disorder symptoms in adolescence: a 10-year longitudinal follow-up study in the Netherlands and the UK; The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, Feb. 20, 2024.

The bad news: A greater interest in food at ages 4-5 predicts eating disorders at ages 12-14, and genes are likely involved. The good news is that much of the harm is preventable through appropriate "parental feeding strategies."

Using the parent-reported Children's Eating Behaviour Questionnaire, researchers queried 2,801 Dutch and 869 British families on the eating habits of 2- to 4-year-olds. They were looking for specific behaviors associated with appetite avidity — a greater interest in food characterized by overeating.

Higher avidity in early childhood increased the odds of adolescent binge eating by 47%, uncontrolled eating by 33%, emotional eating by 26%, restrained eating by 16% and compensatory behaviors, such as extreme dieting, misuse of diet products and bulimia by 18%.

By contrast greater satiety responsiveness — appropriate feelings of fullness — lowered risks for maladaptive eating.

The authors stressed parenting's role in not using food for any purpose other than nutrition, for example, as a reward, and in teaching children to recognize when they are full and to eat more slowly.

Genes also affect eating behavior.

A genetic predisposition to higher body mass index (BMI) was associated with binge eating while low-BMI genes are linked to anorexia. However, according to the behavioral susceptibility theory, the extent to which genes matter depends on the child's early relationship to food.

This finding confirms earlier research on how parenting affects children's eating habits.

'Preventive' antibiotics during pregnancy are anything but

Risk of Immune-related Diseases in Childhood after Intrapartum Antibiotic Exposure; American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Feb. 9, 2024.

Doctors who prescribe antibiotics to pregnant women to prevent early-onset group B Streptococcus (GBS) disease in newborns are exposing children to a host of immune-related diseases, according to a Finnish study.

Antibiotics are given to prevent transmission of group B strep bacteria in women's vaginas to offspring as they pass through the birth canal.

Researchers studied prescription records from a Finnish state health database of 45,575 women who gave birth vaginally, of whom 9,733 (21%) received antibiotics during pregnancy. They defined exposure as any antibiotic prescribed within 24 hours of birth.

Using the same database, they followed children for autoimmune, allergic and obstructive airway diseases for an average of 5.1 years for children of exposed mothers and 6.4 years for children of unexposed mothers.

Children of antibiotic-exposed mothers were at 28% higher risk for developing autoimmune problems than unexposed children.

Removing children who had received a separate antibiotic dose in infancy did not change the result, meaning the relevant exposure was through the mother, not the child.

GBS disease, which causes blood infections, occurs in approximately 1 in 2,000 births — 22% of African children with GBS die, compared with 11% of U.S. and 7% of European babies.

Kids, media and language development: Why 'why' doesn't matter

Variability and patterns in children's media use and links with language development; Acta Paediatrica, Jan. 10, 2024.

Given children's increasing exposure to social media and concerns over media-associated health risks, U.S. researchers investigated whether the reasons 17- to 30-month-old babies were subjected to screen time mattered in the child's language development.

Investigators recruited 302 caregivers who answered questions about their child's vocabulary, sentence length and technology use. Each child's technology usage was categorized across any device/platform by type of media (video/TV, video games, video chat and/or e-books) and purpose (education, calming, enjoyment).

They found that 92.4% of children watch videos, those who do spend twice as much time per day (2 hours) compared to an hour of reading, and children from low-income or low-education families spend the most time watching videos.

Given the subjects' ages, most of this activity is passive (watching) as opposed to active (video chat or gaming).

Their data suggest a strong negative relationship between screen time and vocabulary and sentence length: the more videos, the worse the language skills.

They found no significant associations between the purpose of video watching and either outcome, although children plopped before a screen for non-babysitting reasons had somewhat longer average sentence lengths.

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Angelo DePalma, Ph.D.
Angelo DePalma, Ph.D., is a science reporter/editor for The Defender.

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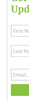
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